DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 201 FL 025 303

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| AUTHOR | LoCastro, Virginia |
| TITLE | Learner Subjectivity and Pragmatic Competence Development. |
| PUB DATE | 1998-03-14 |
| NOTE | 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (20th, Seattle, WA, March 14-17, 1998). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Acculturation; Case Studies; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Cultural Context; Foreign Countries; *Japanese; Journal Writing; Oral Language; Personal Narratives; *Pragmatics; Second Language Learning; Student Attitudes |
| IDENTIFIERS | Japan |

ABSTRACT

A researcher undertook a study of her own second language learning progress, focusing on development of pragmatic competence in Japanese and the relationship between language and social identity while living and working in Japan. The study addressed three areas: the formal instructional context of studying Japanese in Japan; the influence of the social context; and the learner's social and cultural identity in relation to efforts to increase pragmatic ability in Japanese. Data were gathered in a diary on experiences, thoughts, and insights concerning the three areas of study; in an oral proficiency interview conducted at the beginning of the project; and in discussions with other non-Japanese and Japanese individuals. With regard to the educational context for learning Japanese, findings concerning the teacher and concerning group vs. individual lessons are discussed. The influence of social context on pragmatic development is then examined in out-of-class encounters, noting the difficulty of finding "safe" contexts in which to practice language skills. In discussing the role of the learner's social and cultural identity in pragmatic development, focus is on the subjectivity involved in constructing those identities in this context. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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# Learner Subjectivity and Pragmatic Competence Development

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**AAAL'98 Paper** **14 March 1998**

# Learner subjectivity and pragmatic competence development

**By Virginia LoCastro, International Christian University, Tokyo**

## *Introduction*

Following Cohen (1997), who provided insights from his own self-study of learning Japanese at the TESOL'97 Sociolinguistics Colloquium, I decided to examine my own language learning efforts, focusing specifically on becoming more pragmatically able in Japanese in the target language environment of living and working in Tokyo. However, while Cohen was primarily interested in learner descriptions of the classroom, I shall examine the relationship between language and social identity in the context of functioning successfully as a professional in the target language working environment. In this case study, I shall elaborate on three areas: the formal instructional context of studying Japanese in Japan, the influence of the social context, and the learner's social and cultural identity vis-a-vis efforts to increase pragmatic ability in Japanese. This ethnographic study of an individual learner attempts to contribute to our knowledge base of pragmatic development over time. Since Schmidt and Frota's (1986) paper, learners' perceptions of their language development have not found a place in the literature and, moreover, an account of a professional seeking to function successfully in the target language community, using situationally appropriate language, may be a unique contribution. According to Hall (1995:217), few studies have examined how learner social identities and others' evaluations of the learners mediate language learning. My case study is only a small step in the direction of examining the effects of the discourse of cultural differences; the purpose is to generate hypotheses for future research on pragmatic development.

The study is limited to discussion of pragmatic issues. I shall use pragmatic "competence" to refer to development of a learner's knowledge,

whereas pragmatic ability denotes both production, that is, the ability to use the language appropriately according to the situation, and comprehension, which comprises the ability to interpret others' intended messages.

The learner subjectivity perspective (Siegal, 1996; Peirce, 1995) adopted for this paper provides a lens which promotes greater awareness of the dimensions of language learning in the target language community frequently ignored or glossed over by researchers in SLA.

## *Research Questions*

I initially posed one research question: What are the problems of becoming pragmatically fluent in a second language at an advanced enough level to function successfully in a professional working environment in the target language community? This question was then broken down into three components:

(a) What is the role of the formal instructional context in Japan in pragmatic development?

(b) What is the influence of the social context on such development?

(c) How does the learner's social and cultural identity relate to pragmatic development?

I shall now describe the actual study.

## *Methodology*

### Procedures

In April, 1997, I began a diary in which I made entries on experiences, thoughts, and insights related to the three research questions. In order to support my self-report data with an objective view of my level of proficiency, I arranged to have an OPI, oral proficiency interview, in Japanese in April, 1997. I was classified on the ACTFL scale as "Intermediate-Low," mostly due to my poor vocabulary and passive stance, which is interpreted as my taking

a reactive rather than assertive, pro-active approach in interacting with the interviewer.

Subject

Let me briefly situate myself. A doctorate in linguistics and undergraduate and masters degrees in French literature and linguistics, I had studied three languages, in this order --Latin, French, and Spanish, before coming to Japan. For many purposes I am bilingual in French, with evidence coming from my having lived, worked, and studied in Quebec for four years. I point all this out to demonstrate that I have successfully learned one language well enough to carry out a professional life. Note that I had not studied Japanese before I left for Japan and that during my approximately 15 years in the country, I have had regular lessons usually on a once a week basis. In addition, I have been a language teacher for many years and have engaged in a number of research projects related to language teaching and education in general. I have also trained language teachers. Therefore, I am not a naive, uninformed language learner.

Further, as I grew up in an area of the US with a very mixed population before people used the term "multicultural," I am comfortable in multilingual environments, having been exposed to it as a small child with my father's family and then due to my having lived abroad, in Paris and Quebec as well as having traveled abroad extensively since my adolescent. I am used to crossing boundaries and presuppose permeable borders, welcoming the discursive construction of the self.

Data Collection Procedures

In sum, this paper is an ethnographic study, based on self-report data, with the addition of the OPI rating on my speaking and listening proficiency in Japanese. However, I did discuss my experiences and insights with other

non-Japanese and Japanese. Thus, while I cannot make generalizations from this study to the whole population of JSL learners in Japan, I am confident that my experiences and subjective position are not grossly dissimilar to others in the same learning situation.

In the next section, I present my findings and discuss them together.

## Findings and Discussion

**RQ#1 What is the role of the formal instructional context in Japan in pragmatic development?**

The first research question concerns the role of the formal instructional environment on my efforts to improve my pragmatic competence and ability in Japanese. Let me start with a description of features of this context.

Since 1992, I have been taking a private lesson on a once-a-week basis at a local private language school with the same teacher. I have used a variety of textbooks and materials, some with explanations in English, some targeting Asian students where all parts of the materials are in Japanese. The most recent one is *An Introduction to Advanced Spoken Japanese* from the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies, 1987, Yokohama, Japan. Note that the general practice is for the teacher and/or the school to choose the textbooks for the student.

The lessons were organized as follows:

--review a grammar/structural pattern *katachi*--with sentence examples written on the board

--do pattern practice of the pattern, following the exercises in the book

--try to personalize the exercises, and/or make more complex sentences

Frequently, the lesson ended with the teacher saying *sono katachi, yoku tsukaimasu.* (You can use it to talk with your friends/colleagues) *Oboete kudasai.*

With each unit in the textbook, there is a lengthy conversation, which was used after having done all of the exercises, for listening comprehension and pronunciation (reading aloud). There are no textual analysis exercises to promote deeper understanding of the use of the patterns in context. I was free to ask questions about usage or use, which I was expected to do in Japanese only. The unit also includes, in English, a Usage page as well as a grammar review. Those sections of the textbook were there for me to use for study or review, but not referred to in class. Note that the teacher never translated anything into English; she would restate in Japanese only.

Teacher

The teacher is a Japanese woman in her 30s, who holds a basic undergraduate degree from a Japanese university. She does not have a masters degree, nor has she had extensive formal teacher training beyond a basic level. She never used English with me, nor did she write it on the board. She always addressed me as LoCastro-san and I did the same with her. Given my multiple experiences in Japan with Japanese language teachers, she was very good in several ways; however, in one critical way, there is a disadvantage: in terms of level of education, social status, and experience, she is not able to help learners such as myself go beyond a very basic level of formal politeness. The reason derives from the fact that pragmatic ability for Japanese correlates with social status, educational background, level of training, the type of professional work, and age. It has proven difficult to find Japanese teachers of the language who are qualified to work with non-Japanese who seek to learn more than conversational Japanese or Japanese for studying in a Japanese university.

Group vs. private lessons

The few times I took group lessons I found problems in two areas: (1) students whose mother tongues are kanji-based languages, such as Chinese, Korean, have a distinct advantage over those coming from non-kanji-based languages and the teachers tend to write characters on the board while explaining grammar or vocabulary; (2) if most of the learners are English speaking, the teacher will almost inevitably resort to using English. Thus, I consistently elected to take private lessons, despite the considerable costs involved.

Now, I shall discuss my findings, organizing the comments following reflecting Richards and Rodger's model for analysis of teaching methods (1986): (1) what is the theory of language embedded in the teaching practices in Japan? (2) further, what is the theory of language learning? and (3) how is pragmatics handled in the formal instructional environment?

With regards to the theory of language which is embedded in the practices, teaching discourse, and textbooks, it appears that language is viewed as being composed of sentences, that is, *bun*.. The frequent use of words in Japanese such as *katachi*, *bun,* and *keitai* ,and the fact that I never experienced a lesson in which text or discourse was ever used for study purposes provide further evidence of a structural view of language. In my view, the use of a text or passage composed of a conversation, not based on actual, authentic language use, also reflects the notion that language is made up of sentences, as, after all, conversations appear in a general way to be sentences strung together. The potential value of a conversational text is negated when it is used as a forum to practice grammatical patterns.

Note as well that an analysis of textbooks used to teach English in junior and senior high schools in Japan clearly demonstrate this same view of

language. In particular, those for teaching writing imply that writing means writing sentences.

The notion that language is composed of sentences results, in my view, in the textbooks and other learning materials being written with little attention to enabling the learner to reach a point where s/he can understand the system of the language. It seems that each lesson is taught as an individual item, without an effort to build a knowledge base. The implicit syllabus embedded in the materials appears to be based on some notion of working from easy to difficult according to structural criteria.

It must be further acknowledged that foreigners are taught what is called *nihongo*, in contrast to *kokugo*, i.e. the national language. Kokugo is said to be the mother tongue, and it is introduced in primary school to teach pupils about their L1 from a formal perspective involving introduction to literature, thus focusing on text or discourse. It does not involve the teaching of grammar. Nihongo does involve grammar, and takes the perspective that the educational purpose in this case is the teaching to non-Japanese the language from word to phrase to sentence levels. Rarely is discourse in the form of everyday speech studied. Non-Japanese learn about sentence particles, such as *wa* and *ga*, in grammatically correct, but unnatural Japanese. In other words, foreigners are taught something other than the "real" language of the country. What the foreigner is exposed to will not be the language as it is spoken by the average person on the street.

In sum, the formal instructional context --the teaching, the materials, the emphasis on rote learning--, does little to facilitate the learning of situationally appropriate language for learners who are engaged in social and professional activities in the academic community. Consequently, I have felt that both my social and professional identities were compromised as a result.

As for a theory of language learning, memorization is assumed to be the primary means for getting the input to become intake. The classroom was

not the place, even with group lessons, for communicative practice. The teacher recommended practice outside the classroom. No other learning strategies were addressed by the teacher.

With regards to learning strategies, it was my experience that the dependence of adult learners on having a written script to reinforce what one has learned in the oral mode is undercut. The study of characters was a major undertaking, requiring constant daily use to avoid forgetting what I had studied. Rote memorization is the sole learning strategy as very few of the characters have meanings which one can associate with the shape. Furthermore, Japanese characters will have at least two readings, one "Japanese" and the other derived from Chinese; however, most commonly used kanji will have more than two pronunciations and meanings. Consequently, given that I wanted primarily to focus on developing my speaking and listening skills, I could not devote the time required to master the characters so that I could read supporting written texts fluently and quickly enough the way I could in French or Spanish. A further complication arise due to the diglossic nature of Japanese, i.e. spoken and written Japanese can be quite different from each other, and this means that written texts were not available to support my study. University documents may be written in a style of Japanese closer to what I need to learn, but they are written , not spoken language texts.

As for direct teaching of pragmatic knowledge, this can be found in the units on honorific language, *keigo*, and in the numerous comments on appropriacy which appear in virtually every lesson. Since the Jorden materials, published in 1963, it has been common place to provide help to learners on rules of speaking. Limitations arise, however, as I found the contexts of use are not illustrative enough and were inadequate for other reasons. Further, as pragmatics is a relatively new area in language education, there were mistakes in the pragmatic analysis of formal markers,

confusing form with function, as, for example, with V + *te-kudasai*, regarded in the teaching materials as a polite request form. However, analysis of its use in everyday speech by Japanese people themselves demonstrates clearly that it is used as a request rarely (2.9% of the discourse contexts surveyed) and that contextual features are crucial in constraining its use (Shiraishi, 1997). (Examples: *shizuka ni shite kudasai.* or *kore tsukatte kudasai.*)

A question as to possible reasons for not seeking out a formal instruction situation more suitable to my learner needs. Factors such as cost, proximity of the school, scheduling, and comparisons with other programs led me to work with what was the best of those I had experienced during some 15 years in Japan.

**RQ (b): What is the influence of the social context on development?**

I have already indicated some influences from the Japanese sociohistorical context on the formal instructional environment; now, I will focus on out-of-class encounters. In the professional environment in which I work, I found that the social context, the permissible roles, and the tendency towards boundary maintenance behaviors have been impediments to pragmatic development. I am intimidated by the enormous gap between what is expected of me linguistically and pragmatically and what I was able to learn prior to my taking up my current position. My social status in Japan, as an associate professor at a prestigious, well known, middle to upper class university in Tokyo, would require me to use *keigo* exclusively while functioning on campus and professionally in general while in Japan. The system of *keigo* has embedded within it a distinctly hierarchical view of how human beings are to be organized. Age, status, and gender differences are marked linguistically and cannot be avoided. My own ideological subject position, i.e. based on experiences in more egalitarian, less-gendered societal

structures, has caused dissonance to the extent of causing demotivation to learn the situationally appropriate language beyond minimal attention to formal politeness routines.

With regards to permissible roles, the juggling of linguistic markers to enact the roles is, simply said, difficult. An example of a typical situation is when my addressee, especially if higher in status and older, is free to use less formal Japanese in speaking to/with me. However, I am not expected to use the same level, particularly if there are other colleagues or students co-present. This situation tends to result in feelings of great distance in communication, and it does not provide a context for learning and practicing appropriate language. I was not able to use such learning strategies as reusing what I had heard and adding to it to form my own utterances unless I am able to practice with someone of equal status.

The hierarchical, social status differences also cause dissonance and embarrassment with regards to talking with students. When a non-Japanese faculty member can understand and use formal Japanese, then the student will use Japanese following normative expectations, which includes marking the difference in rank. However, if the faculty member cannot utilize more than conversational Japanese (which is what most try to learn), the students may switch to that style of speaking, perhaps even to foreigner talk Japanese, The students, however, are not behaving linguistically according to norms. Using foreigner talk is equivalent to using informal Japanese, which would be situationally inappropriate as it does not mark the rank or status difference between teacher and student.

A further complicating factor is the boundary maintenance behavior, which is manifested in a very common tendency for non-Japanese to be in restricted social contexts. There is a general ghettoization of non-Japanese, particularly those who have not married into the culture, and those who are involved in academia, who are constructed according to the local stereotype

of non-Japanese as language teachers. The result is that one does not easily mix with Japanese other than those related to one's work environment. Consequently, the potential for development of one's fluency in the use of situationally-appropriate language is limited.

Due to what I have experienced as enormous pressure, it has been difficult to find "safe" contexts in which I could feel I could risk practicing situationally appropriate language. It is as if one were to arrive in a professional context already pragmatically proficient. In other social contexts, with friends, in transactional encounters, in teachers' organizations, etc., none require the same level of Japanese as that expected in professional work environments. The out of classroom contexts are not conducive to fostering pragmatic fluency at the level required.

**RQ (c): How does the learner's social and cultural identity related to pragmatic development?**

Due to time limitations, I can only touch the very top of this iceberg. Let me organize my comments following Peirce (1995).

(1) The multiple nature of the subject

Despite the fact that individuals have multiple selves in all cultures and societies, the repertoire of selves I am expected to negotiate linguistically in Japan does, in my view, complicate one's efforts to become pragmatically fluent. As a university professor, I am involved in interactions with a variety of individuals on campus and off campus, all of whom I must address from that subject position, ideally with a range of pragmatically appropriate forms. Within that social space, formal linguistic markers enact subtle distinctions.

(2) Subjectivity as a site of struggle

As an adult with the personal history I described above, I have sought to develop a rich, cosmopolitan public and private life in Japan, free to interact with whomever I choose and to carry out research and engage in other intellectual pursuits . A dynamic, interactive relationship is set up between me, my expectations and assumptions and the surrounding environment with its expectations and assumptions. I am strongly motivated to function as a female professional, with feminist, liberal ideological perspectives. However, attempts to negotiate, to co-construct my own subject position in Japan have not been successful due to the constant struggle against stereotypes and prejudices.

As Hall (1993:158) states, "the locus of language competence is moved from an individual... to the locally situated, yet socioculturally webbed everyday activities in which ... we live our lives." Siegal (1994) quotes from an American woman in her study who also experienced difficulty in improving her Japanese pragmatic appropriacy due to societal pressures regarding her self-identity.

### *Conclusion*

Because pragmatic ability clearly implicates the self identity of the learner, the learner seeks to negotiate his or her social identity in a particular society /culture through situationally appropriate behavior. This is particularly problematic for adult learners who seek to function professionally in the target community, but, despite the dissonance, may not be open to subordination to stereotypes dominant in the society. Societies are not equal in enabling learners, almost always outsiders, to adjust to the culture, due to local values and beliefs regarding dimensions of power, ideology, and racial differences. Perhaps because much research on SLA has been done in relatively egalitarian societies --Canada, the US, the UK, Australia--, little attention has

been paid to other societies and cultures which problematize pragmatic development in ways which have remained unexplored.

This case study does generate a number of hypotheses which could motivate SLA and specifically pragmatic development research. What I have found clearly has implications for one particular are of SLA: attitudes and motivation. To get beyond what we already know, based primarily on data collected through questionnaires for the most part, we need to examine the role of factors identified in social psychology research, such as intergroup relations, ethnolinguistic identity, as well as contemporary post-modern discussions of identity. Ultimately, pragmatic proficiency implicates not only identity but also an orientation to the second language such that the world view of that language is taken in and becomes a part of the learner's persona, at least for instrumental purposes. I suggest that, to understand pragmatic competence development, we need to delve more deeply into issues of difference, identity, the construction of the Other, and the power of prejudices.

Living and working as a cosmopolitan adult, while attempting to achieve fluency and improve one's pragmatic ability in the target language, is even in an ideal world a difficult undertaking. The sociocultural factors of the host culture are embedded in all areas of one's life in a second language learning context, with the instructional context as only one of the spaces. The field of second language acquisition could benefit from greater attention to the social dimensions in language learning.

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